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XV.—IMPRESSIONIST *VERSUS* JUDICIAL CRITICISM.

We are told that Louis XIV once submitted a sonnet he had written to the judgment of Boileau, who said, after reading it: "Sire, nothing is impossible for your Majesty. You set out to write some bad verses and you have succeeded." The point of this story for the modern reader lies not so much in the courage of the critic as in the meekness of the king. With the progress of democracy one man's opinion in literature has come to be as good as another's—a deal better too, the Irishman would add—and such words as deference and humility are in a fair way to become obsolete. We can scarcely conceive to what an extent men once allowed their personal impressions to be overawed and held in check by a body of outer prescriptions. Only a century ago an Edinburgh reviewer could write: "Poetry has this much at least in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers whose authority it is no longer lawful to question."¹ Racine tells us that the audience did not dare laugh at the first performance of his comedy *Les Plaideurs* for fear that "it might not laugh according to the rules."

The revolt came at last from this tyranny of the "rules," and the romantic critics opposed to the neo-classic narrowness a plea for wider knowledge and wider sympathy; they would see before they began to oversee, and be historical rather than dogmatic; they would neither exclude nor conclude but explain; above all, they would be appreciative, and substitute the fruitful criticism of beauties for the barren

¹ Article on Southey, *Edinburgh Review*, Oct., 1802.

criticism of faults. The one weakness of this whole modern school has been its proneness to forget that knowledge and sympathy are after all only the feminine virtues of the critic. Hence the absence of the masculine note in so much recent criticism, hence the tendency of judgment to be swallowed up completely in sympathy and comprehension. "Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner." Renan one of the most perfect embodiments of the ideal of wider knowledge and wider sympathy, says that when anyone was presented to him he tried to enter into this person's point of view, and serve up to him his own ideas in advance. One thinks almost involuntarily of Dr. Johnson and of how, when people disagreed with him, he "roared them down;" of how men like Reynolds and Gibbons and Burke ventured to present their protest to him only in the form of a Round Robin so that the awful Aristarch might not know on whom first to visit his wrath. It is of course well, and indeed indispensable, that the critic cultivate the feminine virtues, but on condition, as Tennyson has put it, that he be man-woman and not woman-man. Through neglect of this truth criticism has tended in its development during the past century to become first a form of history and then a form of biography and finally a form of gossip; until of late it seems to be falling into its "anecdoteage." Sainte-Beuve says that in studying a writer we should never fail to ask ourselves such questions as the following: "How did he behave in the matter of women and of money? Was he rich or poor? What did he eat and drink and what were his daily habits? Finally what was his vice or weakness?"¹ Sainte-Beuve would have us pursue these inquiries in the name of what he terms *la grande curiosité*. But the danger is manifest that this "grand" curiosity will degenerate in the hands of critics less

¹ *Nouveaux lundis*, t. III, p. 28.

discreet and tactful than Sainte-Beuve into curiosity of the petty or even the prurient type. There has sprung up in this country a whole class of publications that purport to be critical but are in reality only repertories of illustrated-gossip. One of the most popular of American periodicals recently advertised the following attractions: "Henry Van Dyke as he lives in the open, in camp with his children; at his favorite sport of fishing; just as he feels a 'bite,'—in separate strikingly new pictures; also Mr. William Dean Howells hoeing corn, mowing the grass; and Mark Twain trying to coax a rabbit, and with his 'porcelain cat.'" Authors who are dealt with in this fashion would have a right to complain with the Rev. Dr. Folliot¹ that they have been "dished up like a savory omelette to gratify the appetite of the reading rabble for gossip;" and sympathize with that gentleman when he adds indignantly: "What business have the public with my nose and wig?" Sainte-Beuve himself is not above commenting on Michaud's finger-nails ("*il les avait fort noirs, les ongles*"),² and used occasionally to invite in to dinner the cook of Dr. Véron so that he might gossip with her about the great personages of the Second Empire.³

One should hasten to add in the case of Sainte-Beuve that he labored during the latter part of his life to correct, or one might more fairly say to complete, his own earlier method and to assert once more the supremacy of judgment.⁴ It is

¹ In T. L. Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*.

² *Causeries du lundi*, t. XI, p. 486. ³ *Nouvelle Correspondance*, p. 226.

⁴ For Sainte-Beuve's earlier ideal, which would reduce the critic's rôle to pure comprehension and sympathy, see *Pensées de Joseph Delorme* (*Pensée XVII*). This passage has been appropriately selected by Lemâitre as epigraph for his impressionistic *Contemporains*. Sainte-Beuve's change to a more judicial attitude took place about 1848. For important evidence of this change see *Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire*, t. II, p. 114 ff. Cf. also *Portraits littéraires*, t. III, p. 550: "En critique, j'ai assez fait l'avocat, faisons maintenant le juge."

curious to trace the transformation of the militant romanticist of 1830 into the conservative who finally extols as the true type of the critic Malherbe and Boileau and Dr. Johnson. He follows these men in founding his own judgments for the most part on the traditional standards of the classicist, yet no one knew better than Sainte-Beuve that these standards were doomed. "Soyons les derniers des délicats," he exclaims. "Let us be the last of our kind before the great confusion."¹

The "great confusion" that Sainte-Beuve foresaw is now upon us. He himself has been correctly defined in his influence on his successors, not as a defender of standards and judgment, but as a great doctor of relativity. Now nearly all recent criticism, so far as it is anything more than a form of gossip and small talk, may be roughly classified as either impressionistic or scientific; and it is in this doctrine of relativity that both impressionistic and scientific critics unite. To be sure, the doctrine assumes with the impressionist a form closer akin perhaps to true criticism than in the case of the scientific critic, whose method tends only too often to dehumanize the study of literature completely. The impressionist is interested in a book only as it relates itself to his sensibility, and his manner of praising anything that makes this appeal to him is to say that it is "suggestive." The scientific critic for his part is interested solely in the way a book is related as a phenomenon to other phenomena, and when it is the culminating point or the point of departure of a large number of these relationships, he says that it is "significant" (the favorite word of Goethe). If the impressionist is asked to rise above his sensibility and judge by a more impersonal standard, he answers that there is no such impersonal element in art, but only "suggestiveness," and is

¹ *Portraits littéraires*, t. III, p. 550.

almost ready to define art with a recent French writer as an "attenuated hypnosis." If the scientific critic in turn is urged to get behind the phenomena and rate a book with reference to a scale of absolute values, he absconds into his theory of the "unknowable."

We may illustrate by a familiar passage from Taine, who is easily the most eminent of those who have attempted to make criticism scientific. "What do we see," he says in his *English Literature*, "under the fair glazed pages of a modern poem? A modern poet who has studied and travelled, a man like Alfred de Musset, Victor Hugo, Lamartine or Heine, in a black coat and gloves, welcomed by the ladies, and making every evening his fifty bows and his score of *bons mots* in society; reading the papers in the morning, lodging as a rule on a second floor; not over gay because he has nerves and especially because in this dense democracy where we stifle one another, the discredit of official dignities has exaggerated his pretensions, while increasing his importance, and because the keenness of his feelings in general disposes him somewhat to think himself a god."

Now in the first place the results of this attempt to infer from a poem the life and personality of the poet are strangely uncertain. We read in the recently published letters of John Richard Green that when Taine was in England getting information for the last volume of his *English Literature*, he began talking about Tennyson with Palgrave, a great friend of the laureate. "Wasn't he in early youth rich, luxurious, fond of pleasure, self-indulgent?" Taine asked. "I see it all in his early poems—his riot, his adoration of physical beauty, his delight in jewels, in the abandonment of all to pleasure, in wine, and" "Stop! stop!" said Palgrave out of all patience. "As a young man Tennyson was poor—he had little more than £100 a year, his

habits were as they still are, simple and reserved, he cared then as he cares now for little more than a chat and a pipe, he has never known luxury in your sense." Taine thanked Palgrave for his information—and when the book came out Tennyson was found still painted as the young voluptuary of Taine's fancy.¹

Even assuming that Taine's inferences could be drawn correctly, he would have us fix our attention on precisely those features of a poem that are least poetical. The very prosaic facts he is looking for would be at least as visible in the writing of some mediocrity as in a work of the first order. It is indeed when Taine starts out to deal in this fashion with a poet of genius like Milton, to reduce *Paradise Lost* to a mere "sign," that the whole method is seen to be grotesquely inadequate. "Adam," says Taine in his critique of Milton, "is your true pater-familias with a vote, an M. P., an old Oxford man," etc. He listens to the conversation of Adam and Eve, the first pair, only to hear "an English household, two reasoners of the period—Colonel Hutchinson and his wife. Good heavens! dress them at once;" and he continues in this vein for pages.

But, says M. Bourget, speaking for the impressionists, there is another way of approaching the volume of verse that Taine would treat solely from the point of view of its "significance;" and in rendering the "suggestiveness" of the volume to the impressionist sensibility, M. Bourget proceeds to employ a luxuriance of epithet that lack of space forbids our quoting. He asks us to imagine a young woman alone in her boudoir on an overcast winter afternoon. A vague melancholy steals upon her as she reclines at ease in her long chair; all a-quiver with ineffable longing, she turns

¹ *Letters of John Richard Green*, p. 372. Green's anecdote is perhaps not entirely fair to Taine's account of Tennyson as it finally appeared.

to her favorite poet. She does not surmise behind the delicately tinted pages of the beloved book the prosaic facts of environment, the obscure animal origins of talent that are so visible to Taine. What she does perceive is the dream of the poet—"the inexpressible and mysterious beyond that he has succeeded in throwing like a halo around his verses." For Taine the stanzas are a result; for the young woman "who intoxicates her heart with them so deliciously" they are a cause. "She does not care for the alembic in which the magic philter has been distilled, provided only this magic is operative, provided her reading culminates in an exquisite and trembling exaltation," and "suggests to her dreams either sweet or sad, but always productive of ecstasy." Who does not see, concludes M. Bourget, that entirely different theories of art are implied in the two ways of approaching the volume of verse? ¹

The two theories are different indeed; yet they are alike in this, that neither the "significance" of the volume to Taine nor its "suggestiveness" to M. Bourget affords any real means of escape from the quicksands of relativity to some firm ground of judgment. We may be sure that a third-rate bit of contemporary sentimentality will "suggest" more ineffable dreams to the young woman in the long chair than a play of Sophocles. To state the case more generally, how many books there are that were once infinitely suggestive and are still of the highest significance in literary history which yet intrinsically—in their appeal to what Emerson calls the "constant mind of man"—are now seen to be of very inferior value! This is eminently true of certain writings of Rousseau, to whom much of the peculiar exaggeration of the "*sens propre*" or individual sense that one finds in

¹ Abridged from the chapter on Taine in *Essais de Psychologie contemporaine*.

the impressionists can ultimately be traced.¹ If the special modes of sensibility that impressionism exhibits go back to Rousseau, its philosophical theory may best be considered as a reappearance in modern thought of the ancient maxim that man is the measure of all things. This celebrated dictum became current at a decisive moment in Greek life and would indeed seem to sum up almost necessarily the point of view of any age that has cast off traditional standards. The all-important question is whether one interprets the maxim in the spirit of the sophists or in that of Socrates. The resemblance between the impressionistic and the sophistic understanding of the maxim is unmistakable; not only the individual man, but his present sensations and impressions are to be made the measure of all things. "All of us," says M. Anatole France, "judge everything by our own measure. How could we do otherwise? since to judge is to compare, and we have only one measure, which is ourselves; and this measure is constantly changing. We are all of us the sport and playthings of mobile appearances." Perhaps no recent writer has shown more of the Socratic spirit in his use of the maxim than Emerson. "A true man," he says, "belongs to no other time and place, but is the centre of things. Where he is, there is nature. He measures you and all men and all events." Though Emerson thus asserts the maxim, he has not therefore succumbed like M. France to the doctrine of relativity and the feeling of universal illusion that accompanies it; on the contrary, he has attained to a new sense of the unity of human nature—a unity founded, not on tradition, but on insight. He says somewhere that he finds such an identity both of thought and sentiment in the best books of the world, that they seem to him to be the

¹ "Voici enfin Jean-Jacques, précurseur du xix^e siècle, qui dans l'individu, c'est-à-dire dans le Moi affectif et passionnel, voit la mesure unique de toute chose." Pellissier, *Études de Littérature contemporaine*.

work of "one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman." Now it is evidently this one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman who is with Emerson the measure of all things, and the individual man only in so far as he has realized in himself this essential human nature. To be sure, the line is often hard to draw in practice between the two types of individualist. There were persons in ancient Athens—for example, Aristophanes in the *Clouds*—who treated Socrates as an ordinary sophist. In the same way, there are persons to-day who fail to see the difference between Emerson and an ordinary impressionist. "The source of Emerson's power," says Professor Santayana, "lay not in his doctrine but in his temperament."¹

Emerson's language is often undistinguishable from that of the impressionist. "I would write on the lintels of my doorpost, *whim*." "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion." "Life is a flux of moods." But he is careful to add that "there is that in us which changes not and which ranks all sensations and states of mind." The impressionist denies this element of absolute judgment and so feels free to indulge his temperament with Epicurean indolence; at the same time he has the contemptuous indulgence for others that befits beings who are the "sport and playthings of mobile appearances." M. France says that he "despises men tenderly." We would reply in the words of Burke that the "species of benevolence which arises from contempt is no true charity." Impressionism has led to a strange increase in the number of dilettantes and *jouisseurs littéraires*, who have given to the precept *De gustibus non*—developments that would certainly have surprised its author. The Horatian plea for an honest liberty of taste has its necessary corrective in the truth that is very bluntly stated in a Spanish proverb: "There are tastes that deserve the

¹ *Poetry and Religion*, p. 218.

cudgel.”¹ We are told that Sainte Beuve was once so offended by an outrageous offense to good taste in a remark of Nicolardot’s, that, yielding to an irresistible impulse, he kicked him out of the room. Dante, in replying to a certain opponent, says with the instinct of a true Italian that he would like to answer such “bestiality not with words but with a knife.” We must remember that “good taste” as formerly understood was made up of two distinct elements: first, one’s individual sensibility, and secondly, a code of outer rules by which this sensibility was disciplined and held in check. The observance of these rules became for the community of well-bred people a sort of *noblesse oblige* and taste in this sense has been rightly defined by Rivarol as a man’s literary honor. Now that the outer code has been abrogated, taste is not therefore delivered over to the caprices of a vagrant sensibility; taste is attained only when this sensibility is rectified with reference to an inwardly apprehended ideal, and in this sense may be defined as a man’s literary conscience; it is, in short, only one aspect of the struggle between our lower and higher selves. Some indeed would maintain that taste is not a thing thus to be won by any effort of the will, but is rather an inborn and incommunicable tact, a sort of mysterious election, a free gift of the muses to a predestined few; that in literature many are called and few are chosen. In the article *Goût* of the Philosophical Dictionary Voltaire discourses on the small number of the elect in matters of taste, and in almost the next article (*Grâce*) turns all his powers of mockery on those who assert the same doctrine in religion. Not only individuals but whole nations were once held to be under the reprobation of the muses. As Voltaire says sadly, *presque tout l’univers est barbare*. Perhaps even to-day persons might be found who

¹ “Hay gustos que merecen palos.”

would reply in the negative to the famous query of Father Bouhours whether a German can have wit. There are only too many examples in Germany and elsewhere of how far infinite industry and good intentions are from sufficing for the attainment of taste. However it may be in theology, it remains true in literature, as Gautier remarks, that works without grace are of no avail.

But one may recognize an element of predestination in the problem of taste and not therefore acquiesce in the impressionist's preaching of the fatality and finality of temperament. Everyone, to be sure, has an initial or temperamental taste, but it is hard to say how far this taste may be transformed by subordinating it to the higher claims of our nature. Dr. Johnson says that if he had no duties and no reference to futurity he would spend his life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman. Here then is the temperamental taste of Dr. Johnson, and if he had been a disciple of M. France, he might have accepted it as final. Boswell reports an outburst of Johnson on this very subject: "Do not, Sir, accustom yourself to trust to *impressions*. By trusting to impressions, a man may gradually come to yield to them, and at length be subject to them, so as not to be a free agent, or what is the same thing in effect, to *suppose* that he is not a free agent. A man who is in that state should not be suffered to live; . . . there can be no confidence in him, no more than in a tiger."

Johnson would evidently have agreed with the Buddhists in looking on the indolent settling down of a man in his own temperament¹ as the chief of all the deadly sins. A fulmi-

¹ This is the full meaning of the Pāli term *Pamāda*. The opposite quality, *appamāda* or strenuousness—the unremitting exercise of the active will—is the chief of the Buddhist virtues; this oriental strenuousness, one should hasten to add, is directed toward self-conquest and not, like the Occidental variety, toward the conquest of the outer world.

nation like the foregoing is good to clear the air after the debilitating sophistries of M. France. Yet we feel that Johnson's point of view implies an undue denial of the individual's right to his own impressions and that therefore it has become in large measure obsolete. It is well for us after all to have fresh and vivid and personal impressions; it is well for us in short to awaken our senses; but we should "awaken our senses that we may the better judge"—and not simply that we may the better enjoy. For instance, Walter Pater continually dwells on the need of awakening our senses, but when he speaks of "living in the full stream of refined sensation," when he urges us to gather ourselves together "into one desperate effort to see and touch," there is a hedonistic flavor in these utterances that can escape no one. On the other hand, there should be no ascetic denial of the value of the impression in itself. M. Brunetière is reported to have said to another critic, whom he suspected of intellectual epicureanism: "*You always praise what pleases you, I never do.*"¹ This is an asceticism of taste worthy of the spectator of Racine's comedy who did not laugh for fear that he might not laugh according to the rules. And so M. Brunetière has been led naturally into his present reactionary attitude; seeing only the evil possibilities of individualism, he would have the modern man forego his claim to be the measure of all things, and submit once more to outer authority. The seventeenth century critic attempted to establish a standard that was entirely outside the individual. The impressionist has gone to the opposite extreme and set up a standard that is entirely within the individual. The problem is to find some middle ground between Procrustes and Proteus; and this right mean would seem to lie in a standard that is in the individual and yet is felt by him to transcend

¹ See Lemaître, *Contemporains*, t. VI, p. xi.

his personal self and lay hold of that part of his nature that he possesses in common with other men.

The impressionist not only refuses the individual man any such principle of judgment to which he may appeal from his fleeting impressions ; he goes farther and refuses men collectively any avenue of escape from universal illusion and relativity ; he denies in short the doctrine embodied in the old church maxim "Securus judicat orbis terrarum," a doctrine so fundamental, we may note in passing, that as recast by Lincoln it has become the cornerstone of democracy : "You cannot fool all the people all the time." M. Anatole France is fond of insisting, like Sainte-Beuve before him, that there inheres in mankind as a whole no such power of righting itself and triumphing over its own errors and illusions. A whole chapter might be made up of passages from Sainte-Beuve on the vanity of fame. "Posterity has allowed three-fourths of the works of antiquity to perish," says M. France in turn ; "it has allowed the rest to be frightfully corrupted. . . . In the little that it has kept there are detestable books which are none the less immortal. Varius, we are told, was the equal of Virgil. He has perished. Aelian was an ass, and he survives. There is posterity for you,"¹ etc. Here again the contrast between the two types of individualist is absolute. "There is no luck in literary reputation," says Emerson. "They who make up the final verdict for every book are not the partial and noisy public of the hour, but a court as of angels, a public not to be bribed, not to be entreated, and not to be overawed decides upon every man's title to fame. Only those books come down which deserve to last. Blackmore, Kotzebue or Pollock may endure for a night, but Moses and Homer stand forever. The permanence of all books is fixed by no effort friendly or hostile but by

¹ *Vie littéraire*, t. I, p. 111.

their own specific gravity or the intrinsic importance of their contents to the constant mind of man."

We should add, then, in order to define our critical standard completely, that the judgment of the keen-sighted few in the present needs to be ratified by the verdict of posterity.¹

The keen-sighted few! We can hardly emphasize this part of our definition too strongly. For if it is not possible in literature to fool all of the public all the time, it is only too possible to fool all, or nearly all, the public some of the time, and some of the public all the time. The opposite view, which would value a book according to its immediate effect on the average man, may be called, for want of a better term, the humanitarian fallacy, and is at present one of the chief perils of criticism. Tolstoy, it will be remembered, defends this fallacy with logical thoroughness in his book on Art, and concludes that the crowning masterpiece of nineteenth century literature is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Emerson, who has been our guide thus far, can be of little service to us here. He had humanitarian illusions of his own—illusions that he shared with his whole generation—and it is unfortunately this, his weakest side, that has been caught by his disciples and enters as a chief ingredient into most of what passes nowadays for Emersonianism. "We," says Emerson, giving fresh expression to his favorite doctrine that man is the measure of all things, "We are the photometers, we the irritable gold-leaf and tinfoil that measure the accumulations of the subtle element. We know the authentic effects of the true fire through every one of its million disguises." One is naturally prompted to inquire whom Emerson means by this

¹ The appeal to the judgment of the keen-sighted few, as opposed to that of the many, first appears in Aristotle, who always assumes an ideal reader, whom he refers to variously as *ὁ σπουδαῖος*, *ὁ φρόνιμος*, *ὁ εὐφυής*. The principle of universal consent as applied to literature, is first clearly stated by Longinus (*περὶ ὑψους*, cap. vii).

"we." Granting that man is a photometer or measure of light, it is yet absurd to add, as Emerson at times comes dangerously near doing, that this ideal measure exists unimpaired in the average untrained individual. Elsewhere Emerson says of Goethe: "He hates to be trifled with and to repeat some old wife's fable that has had possession of men's faith these thousand years. I am here, he would say, to be the measure and judge of these things. Why should I take them on trust?" This may do very well for Goethe, but when the man in the street thus sets up to be the measure of all things, the result is often hard to distinguish from vulgar presumption. The humanitarian fallacy would be comparatively harmless if it did not fit in so perfectly with a commercialism which finds its profit in flattering the taste of the average man, and an impressionism that has lost the restraining sense of tradition and encourages us to steep and saturate our minds in the purely contemporaneous. As it is, these elements have combined in a way that is a menace to all high and severe standards of taste. To use words as disagreeable as the things they describe, literature is in danger of being vulgarized and commercialized and journalized. There are critics who have founded a considerable reputation on the relationship that exists between their own mediocrity and the mediocrity of their readers. Sainte-Beuve says that in writing "we should ask ourselves from time to time with our brows uplifted toward the hilltops and our eyes fixed on the group of revered mortals: What would they say of us?" We may contrast this advice with the familiar story of the American magazine editor who told his young contributor that there was an old lady out in Oshkosh and that he must always have her in mind and be careful to write nothing that would not be clear to her. It evidently makes a difference whether one write in the ideal presence of the masters or in that of the old lady in Oshkosh.

In Emerson's study at Concord, which remains as at the time of his death, almost the first object that meets one's eyes to the right on entering is a portrait of Sainte-Beuve. Emerson is said to have looked on this portrait as a special treasure. There is scarcely a single mention of Sainte-Beuve in Emerson's writings, and it is interesting to be able to connect even thus superficially men so different as the great doctor of relativity and the philosopher of the oversoul. The *Causeries du lundi* and a book like *Representative Men* are at the opposite poles of nineteenth century criticism; yet for this very reason and in spite of his humanitarian illusions,—in spite we may add, of his curiously defective feeling for the formal side of art,—Emerson is the necessary corrective of Sainte-Beuve, who has infinite breadth and flexibility but is lacking in elevation. This lack of elevation in Sainte-Beuve is not an accidental defect, but as he himself was aware, bears a direct relation to his method. His own ambition, as he defines it, is to be a *naturaliste des esprits*, yet he never attempted in his moments of real candor to disguise the barrenness and helplessness of naturalism in dealing with the ultimate problems of life.¹ This inadequacy of both the naturalist and romantic points of view has been even more manifest in recent criticism. Sainte-Beuve himself maintained a happy balance between his regard for traditional standards and his aspiration toward wider sympathy and knowledge. This balance has not been preserved by his successors. Knowledge pursued as an end in itself and unordinated to any principle of judgment has degenerated into the narrowness of the specialist or into dilettanteism.² A too

¹ See, for instance, the striking passage in *Port-Royal* (t. II, p. 442) beginning "Un grand ciel morne, un profond univers roulant, muet, inconnu . . . ; l'homme éclosant un moment, brillant et mourant avec les mille insectes, sur cette île d'herbe flottante dans un marais," etc.

² A definition of the word dilettanteism as here used (a use perhaps more French than English) will be found in Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, p. 59.

exclusive emphasis on breadth and keenness of sympathy has led to the excesses of the impressionist. In certain contemporary critics—Mr. Saintsbury for instance—we see the running to seed of the modern critical school in much the same way that we see the running to seed of the classical school in critics like La Harpe. Mr. Saintsbury has extraordinarily wide knowledge and sympathy—all the needful virtues of the critic, in fact, except accuracy and judgment and taste.¹ Sainte-Beuve said of the critics of the First Empire that they were the “small change” of Boileau. If the critics of to-day are to be anything more than the small change of Sainte-Beuve—or rather of one side of Sainte-Beuve—they need to cultivate, as a counterpoise to their use of the historical and biographical method, a feeling for absolute values ; in short, they need to supplement Sainte-Beuve by what is best in a writer like Emerson. The point may be illustrated by two passages, each peculiarly impressive in its own way.

The first passage is from the end of *Port-Royal*, where Sainte-Beuve is commenting on his own efforts to attain the truth : “How little it is after all that we can do ! How bounded is our gaze—how much it resembles a pale torch lit up for a moment in the midst of a vast night ! And how impotent even he feels who has most at heart the knowing of his object, who has made it his dearest ambition to grasp it, and his greatest pride to paint it—how impotent he feels and how inferior to his task on the day when, this task being almost terminated and the result obtained, the intoxication of his strength dies away, when the final exhaustion and inevitable disgust seize upon him, and he perceives in his turn that he is only one of the most fugitive of illusions in the bosom of the infinite illusion !”

¹ Mr. Saintsbury is naturally at his worst in his treatment of Boileau (*History of Criticism*, Bk. V, Ch. 1). Some of the inaccuracies and absurdities of this chapter were pointed out in a review in the *New York Independent* (January 29, 1903).

And then in contrast to this the last paragraph of Emerson's essay on Illusions: "There is no chance and no anarchy in the universe. All is system and gradation. Every god is there sitting in his sphere. The young mortal enters the hall of the firmament; there he is alone with them alone, they pouring on him benedictions and gifts and beckoning him up to their thrones. On the instant and incessantly fall snow-storms of illusions. He fancies himself in a vast crowd which sways this way and that and whose movements and doings he must obey. . . . Every moment new changes and new showers of deceptions to baffle and distract him. And when by-and-by for an instant the air clears and the cloud lifts for a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones—they alone with him alone."

In passages like this Emerson furnishes some hint of how it is possible to accept the doctrine of relativity without loss of one's feeling for absolute values, and without allowing oneself to be devoured by the sense of illusion, as Amiel was and Sainte-Beuve would have been if he had not found a sort of oblivion in unremitting toil. So far as Emerson does this, he aids criticism in its search for inner standards to take the place of the outer standards it has lost; he helps it to see in the present anarchy the potentialities of a higher order. What we need, he says, is a "coat woven of elastic steel," a critical canon, in short, that will restore to its rights the masculine judgment but without dogmatic narrowness. With such a canon, criticism might still cultivate the invaluable feminine virtues—it might be comprehensive and sympathetic without at the same time being invertebrate and gelatinous.

Our ideal critic, then, would need to combine the breadth and versatility and sense of differences of a Sainte-Beuve with the elevation and insight and sense of unity of an

Emerson. It might be prudent to add of this critic in particular what Emerson has said of man in general, that he is a golden impossibility. But even though the full attainment of our standard should prove impossible, some progress might at least be made toward tempering with judgment the all-pervading impressionism of contemporary literature and life.

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